

NTSB to propose repair changes

By Alan Levin, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Federal accident investigators will call today for changes in how airlines maintain their planes when they meet to decide what caused the crash last year of a commuter flight in which 21 people were killed.

As a result of the investigation into the crash of Air Midwest Flight 5481, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) also will recommend improvements in how airlines calculate how much passengers and their luggage weigh, three sources familiar with the investigation say.

Flight 5481 might have been slightly above its allowable weight when it took off on Jan. 8, 2003, from Charlotte/Douglas International Airport because federal guidelines underestimated how much the average passenger actually weighs. The accident prompted airlines to weigh passengers, and federal regulators added 10 pounds to the estimated weight of each passenger because estimates had not kept up with people's girth.

The nose on Flight 5481 — a Beech 1900D aircraft — shot skyward after takeoff. That prompted the plane to lose speed and plunge to the ground not far from the runway.

The sources say that the NTSB will most likely identify bad maintenance work, exacerbated by excess weight at the rear of the aircraft, as the cause of the crash at today's hearing.

A maintenance mistake two days before the crash made it impossible for the pilots to level the tail-heavy propeller plane, according to NTSB records. Mechanics had misadjusted panels at the rear of the tail that raised and lowered the plane's nose.

The plane had flown normally after the repair on several flights that were not fully loaded. But Flight 5481 carried a maximum load centered near the tail.

The combination of the weight and the poor adjustment made the plane uncontrollable.

The NTSB will not close the book on the crash of Flight 5481 without recommending changes in maintenance operations, the sources say. It plans to recommend:

- Improvements in the way mechanics are trained. Pilots currently receive far more training in how to avoid accidental errors than mechanics. Numerous safety experts have for years called for expanding the training to mechanics. Airlines oppose mandatory error-reduction training because of its costs.
- Finding better ways for airlines to monitor their work and to ensure that errors are caught before they become critical.

In a public hearing last May, NTSB investigators presented evidence that showed numerous flaws in the Air Midwest maintenance operation. The maintenance was done by another firm hired by the airline. A third company employed the mechanics. The airline official who oversaw maintenance at the facility worked a day shift while most of the mechanics worked at night.

Air Midwest also used repair instructions that contained gaps or potentially misleading information. Raytheon, which built the 19-seat commuter plane, issued changes in the repair manual last year.

Air Midwest's parent company, Mesa Air Group, plans to start doing most of its own maintenance within months, according to recent news reports. Company officials did not respond to calls from USA TODAY for comment.

The NTSB investigates all accidents. But it does not have regulatory power. Therefore, it can only recommend that airlines change maintenance procedures. Only the Federal Aviation Administration, which has regulatory power, can force changes on the airlines.

The FAA has been criticized in recent years for failing to keep up with trends in airline maintenance. But the agency says it has taken several recent steps to improve oversight.

It is adding oversight of the rapidly growing firms that provide maintenance for airlines and last month adopted tighter rules governing certain repair stations.